THE RATIONAL STUDY OF ENGLISH GRAMMAR[1]

ALFRED DWIGHT SHEFFIELD
Cambridge, Massachusetts

Teachers of English grammar are obliged to work in face of the disquieting fact that as a branch of science their subject is very imperfectly grounded. In Greek and Latin grammar one can feel that one's teaching, however elementary, is fairly sound science as far as it goes. One can "settle ὅτι's business" once for all. But in English grammar teacher and pupil are certain to fetch up in ambiguities which show them to be working with definitions that are not critically valid. It hardly excuses this state of things to say that a living speech such as English is not to be brought within formulas and logical categories. The fact that a subject-matter is non-logical does not warrant bad logic in our reasoning about it. This is doubly the case with English grammar, since in the modern view of language-study it is valued less as making for correctness of speech than as affording a discipline in thinking. Thus the Committee of Fifteen dwell in their report on its "discipline in subtle analysis, in logical division and classification, in the art of questioning, and in the accomplishment of making exact definitions." Logical definitions and classifications, however, are precisely what English grammar lacks, so that we must regard such language as describing, not the present status of our subject, but its ideal. English grammar will gain full standing as a discipline and a science only when its teachers and textbook writers address themselves to a first-hand survey of the facts of actual English speech. And this survey, I believe, will be guided by the demand that grammatical statements of the facts of speech shall reflect the more modern view of the facts of thinking.

The confused and uncertain procedure of English grammar-study appears at the outset in the distinction of the four cardinal

[1] Read before the New England Association of Teachers of English.

parts of speech: noun, verb, adjective, and adverb. In an inflected tongue the distinction of these terms is, of course, primarily a matter of etymology. Thus the words *bellica, belli,* in *bellica gloria, belli gloria,* though alike in meaning and function, are classed as adjective and noun respectively on the ground of their forms. In English, on the other hand, since inflections are few, the grammarians rightly insist that distinction of parts of speech shall rest upon function. One after another of the best recent grammars prepares the pupil by explicit statement to look solely to construction, to the part a word plays in the sentence. They encourage him to believe that clear wits and attention to syntax will make parsing a simple logical exercise. But the pupil who takes them at their word will come to wreck at once. To begin with, he will find a "noun" defined, not in terms of the part it contributes to sentence-structure, but in terms of its meaning; as a word that *names* something—as if an adjective did not just as truly name a quality as does its corresponding abstract noun. The one characteristic function of a noun may, indeed, be brought in by the back door in some such remark as that "the subject of a sentence always contains a noun or noun-equivalent"; but there is no explicit statement of subject-function as a criterion. Indeed there is no real intention of taking function as a criterion, since the genitive forms that remain from the flectional nouns of the older language are still religiously classed as a case of the noun, although they change both its function and its meaning. Thus while *John* may name a person, *John's* denotes a relationship to that person, and in "*John's* Gospel" has the same function and meaning as the adjective "*Johannine.*" Yet our grammars, without a word of warning, drop the appeal to function, and call *John's* not an adjective, but the genitive form of the noun. Much the same confusion arises in the classification of adjectives and verbs, on which I shall not dwell. My insistence thus far on the evident inaccuracy of these terms is not because, like Jack Cade in the play, I would have no men about that talk of a noun and a verb; for I believe that, with a frank warning to the pupil, the terms can conveniently be retained for certain limited and

historical aspects of words. But it seems wholly mischievous that pupils should first be put on their mettle to use a classification logically, and then be "fubbed off" with an ambiguous makeshift criterion that makes logical thinking impossible.

The prevailing emphasis on "parts of speech" works a still further mischief. It fosters the mistaken notion that words as parts of speech are the primary thing in language, and that sentences follow as almost mechanical products of word-joining. This idea of language reflects an antiquated conception of the nature of thinking. Old-fasioned logic, for example, would see in such a sentence as "If wishes were horses, beggars could ride," the product of three wholly different activities of the mind. Jevons describes these as (1) simple apprehension, the act of mind by which we come to have the detached ideas, *wishes, beggars, ride,* etc.; (2) judgment, the act of bringing two ideas into a certain relation; as in *"Beggars ride";* and (3) reasoning, the act of combining judgments to bring about an inference. This conception of the triple nature of thinking is now quite discredited. Logic has had to restate the facts of thought from the evolutionary point of view. Instead of conceiving different kinds of thought-elements that are joined externally, part to part, it views the thinking process as in its nature one and the same throughout. Simple and complex stages of the process may indeed be distinguished; but the higher, complex forms of thinking are viewed as developing out of the simple judgment, very much as an organism develops out of the cell.

Now it is time that the grammar of living speech should be rescued from its status as a pre-Darwinian science. If the simple judgment is to grammatical logic what the cell is to biology, that fact should appear in our account of the fundamental relations of syntax. These relations are, of course, those obtaining between subject, predicate, and their attributive and adverbial modifiers. Conventional grammar represents them as the product of three distinct functions: the predicate being said to "assert"; adjective terms, to "describe" or "qualify"; and adverbial terms, to "modify." As a mere matter of names there is no harm, and perhaps some convenience, in these dis-

tinctions; but they should not be allowed to obscure the fact that at bottom the three functions are one and the same. For example, in such a typical sentence as "Still waters run deep," the pupil should see not only the explicit assertion expressed by the predicate, but also the fact that subject and predicate are each in its turn formed by an implied assertion, namely, that "some waters *are still,*" and that "their running *is deep.*" Adjective and adverbial terms, in short, are simply modified predicates; and the sentence, whether simple or complex, develops as an organized whole by explicit and implied acts of judging in all its parts. Such a view of syntax will of course call for some attention to the speech-equivalents of concepts, since the sentence can equally well be thought of as answering to an analysis of a complex but relatively vague "germ-concept" into its conceptual parts. But concepts themselves can be described simply as mental legal-tender, valid for their meanings because in each case they are convertible into a set of judgments. The pupil who thus approaches the sentence first as a little system of judgments formed into a unit of discourse will learn once for all that it is not words that are added together to make sentences, but sentences that organize words to express their judgment-elements.

The next step, after fixing upon those members in the sentence whose relations give it sentence-form, is to make clear what are the resources of speech for expressing relations. Here may profitably be made the broad distinction among words and parts of words, between what Professor Earle calls "the presentive and symbolic." "Presentive" words and word-elements are those (such as *king, wave, orange, sweet, loud, strike, necessity,* and the syllables *-dom, -ism,* in king*dom,* heathen*ism*) which present to the mind its ideas. "Symbolic," or, better, "relating," words and word-elements are those (such as *some, on, not, since, shall,* and the syllable *-ed* in sound*ed*) which express relationships as obtaining between ideas. This distinction is so vital to grammar that our language-study is surely at fault in leaving the task of explaining it accurately to psychology and logic. But except for detached comments on prepositions, conjunctions,

and auxiliary verbs, our textbooks let it pass.   Professor James[2]
is careful to note that many elements of speech "are nothing
but signs of direction in thought"; and that combinations of
these elements—such as *"either one or the other," "although it
is so, yet"*—supply us with "verbal skeletons of logical rela-
tion, blank schemes of the movement and adjustment of ideas."
Of six recent school grammars, on the other hand, only two
call attention to relating words as a class, and both of these
fall into inaccuracies in describing them.   One says that they
"have no meaning by themselves"; the other that "they express
thought vaguely or in a very general way."   The true distinc-
tion of relating words and word-elements is made in Bosan-
quet's *Logic*,[3] where it is noted (1) that they indeed have
meanings which may have noun and adjective names: thus *at,
for, to,* express relations which have the names *presence, inten-
tion, direction;* but (2) that instead of naming relations as
ideas thought about, they express the fact of relationship
between ideas.   Their meaning presupposes terms to be related.
We can say "Ye are *of* the world, and *for* the world"; but we
cannot say, *"Of* is not *for"* in the sense that *"Red* is not
green."   That is, we use relating words to make propositions,
but do not make propositions about them.

I have dwelt on this point because until we can bring lan-
guage pupils to an accurate notion of relating elements we have
not prepared them to see the distinctive character of English
grammar as compared with the grammar of Latin and other
flectional tongues.   The first difference to be remarked between
an analytic English sentence and a flectional Latin one is that
in English the cleavage between presentive and relating elements
passes, for the most part, *between* words, where in Latin it
passes *through* them.   Words, in fact, are neither in English
nor in Latin the true units for analysis.   It only confuses a
boy's grammatical thinking to let him say that *urbs* is the Latin
for *city.*   *Urbs* means *city* plus a little fringe of context that
tells something of its use in the sentence.   The Latin for *city*
is *urb-,* the presentive "kernel" of *urbs,* since the *-s* and other

flectional endings are simply relating elements, expressing for *urb-* the uses that in English are expressed for *city* by word-order, by stress, and by various relating words.

Since word-order, stress, and even intonation take an important part in English syntax, teachers of English grammar should need no reminder that they deal with a living language, which has its being first of all in facts of utterance, and only at one remove in writing and print. But our whole grammatical tradition is against this point of view. The nomenclature by which we describe grammatical facts we for the most part inherit from the study of Latin, and such is the prestige of names that we heedlessly pass over features native and peculiar to English idiom, simply because they do not find us prepared with their appropriate labels. Thus as to word-order, if in the average school grammar we find it mentioned that the attributive regularly precedes its noun, we shall yet find nothing said of such exceptions as "the day *following*," "the time *being*," "the body *politic*," nor of the fact that an attributive phrase (as in "a day *of grace*") regularly follows its noun. Subject-verb order will be mentioned, but not the fact that we now say "if *war should overtake* us," where in old English and modern German *"should"* is transposed to the end. Inversion of subject-verb order will be noted for questions, but not for such expressions of wish as *"Perish the thought!"* nor for such clauses of condition or concession as that in "Refuseth to hear the voice of the charmer, *charm he* never so wisely."

As to stress, we must probably reckon without our textbook in noting: (1) Its use to mark a word as the predicate. Thus one says *"window* open," meaning "what is open *is the window"*; whereas "window *open"* would mean "the window *is,* or *is to be, open."* Stress, indeed, may strike in at any point of such a sentence as *"That is my belief,"* marking the word it falls on as the logical predicate. (2) The use of even stress with an attributive, as in *waiting maid,* and uneven stress (*waiting* maid) to make the two words a rhythmical unit with a specialized sense.

Not only must word-order, stress, and intonation be recognized in English grammar, but much irrelevant lore now in our grammar-study must go out. Why, for example, should textbooks that define their subject-matter as "the means of expressing relations within the sentence" give space to the subject of gender? Grammatical gender is a thing that does not exist in English, and such distinctions for sex as appear in English nouns and pronouns are purely the affair of the dictionary, Why, again, should we talk of an objective, or even of an accusative and a dative, case in English nouns? If the old flectional dative and accusative had marked real categories of sense we might find the terms still of some logical use. But dative and accusative constructions so merge into each other that even school grammars are dropping the dative; and the resulting "objective" case is scarcely more defensible. A so-called "noun in the objective" is regularly used with prepositions, where it certainly does not mean the "object" of anything. The only certain mark of a case is a case-ending, and to distinguish English cases where the endings are lost is very much like distinguishing frogs by the tails they used to have as tadpoles.   .

Consider for a moment the following question from an examination for college admission last spring:

What is the case of the second *people* in the sentence ending ". . . . it has been pushed by this recent people—a *people* who are still but in the gristle"?

The answer that it is the objective case by apposition with the first *people* depends (1) on the fact that the first *people* is said to be in the objective case, simply because as here used it would in the older language have had a dative ending; (2) on a rule that appositives shall agree in case. But, waiving the question whether *people* repeated here is a true appositive, suppose we ask what agreement in case for English appositives amounts to. The one case-ending in English nouns distinguishes the genitive from the common form for nominative and objective. Now when two nouns are in apposition the rule for the "group-genitive" may put the genitive ending on the second only: as in *"Edward* the *King's* reign." That is,

in the only instances where this case-agreement could be shown by a case-ending the rule does not hold. The question which I quote was therefore asking for distinctions which are no longer valid. *People* is simply repeated absolutely in order to take the appended extra clause; and to speak of it as in any particular case by apposition is, as Florio would say, "to enterlace a plaine matter with quiddities and ink-pot termes."

The rational study of English grammar, therefore, will begin with judgment as the mental movement that shapes our thinking and gives structure to speech. It will then make clear those primary terms and relations within the sentence which show its judgment-elements, and proceed to a review of the means at the command of speech for expressing relations. This review may well set out from the distinction between presentive and relating elements, in order to open the pupil's eyes to the analytic structure of English as compared with Latin. We shall expect special care in the study of word-order, stress, and intonation as a means for expressing word-relations, since these features belong to English as a living speech and must be studied without the help of textbook writers who, as Dr. Jespersen says, "look at English sentences through Latin spectacles."

Such a procedure will, I believe, open the way to a really scientific account of English idiom. And I believe further that such attention to the logic of common speech will make grammar an inspiriting study, in which both teacher and pupil will win an increasing sense of the power and subtlety of the mother tongue.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Henry Sweet's essay on "Words, Logic, and Grammar" (*Philological Society Transactions,* 1875-76) has done pioneer work in breaking away from the assumptions to which the traditional nomenclature of grammar seems committed. The bearing of modern logic, however, on word and sentence, is best developed in Bosanquet's *Logic* (Oxford, 1888; Vol. I, Introduction and chap. i). The psychology of speech is treated in G. F. Stout's *Manual of Psychology* (Book iv, chap. v, "Language and Conception"), and is applied specifically to syntax in Vol. I, Part II, of Wundt's *Völkerpsychologie* (Leipzig, 1900), a work which affords our subject a fresh grounding. Psychological and grammatical categories are compared in detail

in Strong, Logeman, and Wheeler's *Introduction to the Study of the
History of Language* (Longmans, 1891). This book (an adaptation to
English readers of Paul's *Principien der Sprachgeschichte*) devotes several
chapters to syntax. Chap. xvi deals with the actual predicate relation
obtaining in attributive and adverbial terms; chap. xx criticizes the division
of the "parts of speech." Adolf Stöhr's *Algebra der Grammatik* (Leipzig
and Vienna, 1898) is an original and suggestive effort to present facts of
syntax in formulas that are free from the special associations of any one
language. The distinction of presentive and relating elements is dwelt
upon, though not accurately, in John Earle's *Philology of the English
Tongue* (Oxford, 5th ed., 1892). A more scientific treatment of the com-
parative resources of inflected and analytic speech is given in Otto Jesper-
sen's *Progress in Language* (London, 1894). In his St. Louis address on
the "History of the English Language in Its Relation to Other Subjects"
(*Englische Studien,* Vol. XXXV, 1905) Professor Jespersen makes a clear
and convincing protest against the effort to describe modern analytic con-
structions in terms derived from the study of Latin. The question is a live
one, since the *Interim Report* of the British Joint Committee on Gram-
matical Terminology (Professor E. A. Sonnenschein of Birmingham, chair-
man) has advised the use of the Latin case-names in English grammar.
An excellent approach to the whole subject is afforded in chap. v ("Seman-
tic Change") in Hans Oertel's *Lectures on the Study of Language* (Scrib-
ner, 1902). E. P. Morris' *Principles and Methods in Latin Syntax* (Scrib-
ner, 1902) is valuable to students of other grammar than Latin, for it
goes repeatedly into fundamental questions of grammatical procedure.